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## 'The year they cancelled winter'

Wild, mild weather a threat to crops and lake levels

Stan Josey and Nicolaas van Rijn  
STAFF REPORTERS

Record high temperatures lured thousands of Greater Toronto residents out of their homes to throng sidewalk patios, parks and lakeside promenades yesterday.

But the very same conditions only increased worries for grape growers and farmers, as well as shippers who depend on normal Great Lakes water levels.

The balmy weather also wreaked havoc for ski resort operators and the people who normally make a living renting huts to ice fishers on Lake Simcoe.

"This could go down as the year they cancelled winter in southern Ontario," said David Phillips, Environment Canada's senior climatologist.

Yesterday's downtown high of 10.4C was the warmest Jan. 27 in 153 years of record-keeping, toppling the previous record of 10.1C in 1990. And there's no end in sight. According to this week's forecast, daily highs will slip from today's expected 9C to about 2C by Thursday, and climb back up to 6C



Ron Bull/Toronto Star

High temperatures and sunshine left young skaters like Fonna Seivu disappointed at Downsview Park on Jan. 27, 2002.

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by Friday.

At Pearson airport, the high of 11.2C broke a record set in 1990, and Windsor was warmer still with a high of 11.8C, toppling the previous record of 11.1C set in 1974.



Peter Power / TORONTO STAR

By the time all the figures are in, Phillips said, this may well turn out to be the mildest winter in 63 years of record-keeping by Environment Canada.

MAKING THE MOIST OF IT: Balmy recent temperatures have left the skating rink at Nathan Phillips Square a slick mirror.

Queen St. resident Andrea Grossi doesn't have to wait for the records to declare this "one of the best winters ever."

"I don't ski or skate, so cold winter weather doesn't do anything for me," Grossi said as she walked her dog Scoot, a German shepherd-husky cross, along the Toronto waterfront yesterday. "I prefer sunshine, green grass and leisurely afternoons drinking coffee on a sidewalk patio," she laughed, "so I guess I'm doing all right this winter."

But Grossi admitted to being slightly unsettled by the mild weather.

"I keep wondering," she confessed, "whether we're going to end up paying a price for all this mild weather sometime in the future. It just isn't normal — double-digit temperatures in January."

One of the reasons for our mild winter is the jet stream's location much farther north than usual. Instead of being somewhere over the United States, it's fixed in place just north of the Great Lakes. And that's kept cold northern air out of our region.

But the cold air is around. Just ask residents of Trout Lake, in northwestern Ontario near the Manitoba border, which recorded a high of minus 33C yesterday.

"The cold weather has finally arrived from the Arctic for most of Canada," Phillips noted, "but for the moment is being held out of southern Ontario by the jet stream."

Paul Speck, chair of the Wine Council of Ontario and president of Henry Pelham Family Estate Winery in St. Catharines, said his industry is already paying the price for winter's waffling weather.

"This is particularly mind-boggling," Speck said. "We've been losing the crop to the birds, deer and the wind, and this warm weather is just making things worse."

Grapes used for icewine must be frozen solid — thus concentrating the sugars that give icewine its unique flavour — and can only be picked when temperatures range between minus 8C and minus 15C.

The mild conditions, said Art Smith, secretary-manager of the Ontario Grape

Growers Marketing Board, have left 95 per cent of the Niagara Region's icewine grapes on the vine.

"Maybe about 5 per cent has been picked," Smith said, "but a lot of people haven't even started."

Although icewine grapes can be picked as late as March, "the longer it takes to pick them, the lower the yield," he said. "There is a very, very serious and big risk to this, and that's one of the reasons the price of icewine is as high as it is."

Farmers, too, are concerned about the unseasonably mild conditions.

Pickering Councillor Rick Johnson, who chairs the Central Lake Ontario Conservation Authority, says the lack of frost "can mean that some hibernating crops, such as winter wheat, will come out of the ground too soon and then get frozen off in a cold snap."

The Great Lakes shipping industry is also worried about the warm, dry winter, which is driving water levels in the Great Lakes to their lowest in decades.

Although a dam near Cornwall regulates Lake Ontario's water level — it's expected to reach its summer average of 75.05 metres above sea level this summer — levels on the four other Great Lakes continue to drop. Both Lake Michigan and Lake Huron, both of which languished at 30-year lows last year, could face even lower levels this summer.

"It would take a lot of snow and rain between now and summer to get the levels back up, and I don't see anything like that happening," said Environment Canada forecaster Jack Dennahower.

The lack of snow means ever-lower water levels, said Ivan Lantz, an official with the Shipping Federation of Canada, and that forces shippers to lighten their cargo loads.

"This is the worst I've ever seen it since I've been involved in the business," Lantz said. "It's not usual to see it so bad for so long."

He noted that for every 2.5-centimetre drop in lake level, the biggest ocean-going ships must lose 80 tonnes of cargo. And that means reduced profits.

Phillips said southern Ontario has already had the warmest November and December on record.

And, using another definition of Canadian winter — snow on the ground — Phillips said until now we've escaped with a mere taste of winter. So far this winter, he noted, we've had only 15 days with snow on the ground in Toronto, compared with 56 days last year. And total snowfall in the Toronto area this winter has been about 25 centimetres — about half the normal amount.

We're now over the "hump of winter," Phillips said — March 20 and the start of spring is only 1 1/2 months away. "It's all quite astounding," he said, adding that "we haven't even had one really cold day yet."

In fact, he noted, southern Ontario hasn't had a single day with temperatures below minus 12C. In a normal winter, we would have had 18 such days by now, Phillips said.

As for winter storms, southern Ontario hasn't had a single one.

A blush of crocus and daffodil spikes caused by the warm temperatures also caused a rush on garden centres yesterday.

Rob Naraj, manager of the Weal and Cullen nursery in Whitby, said yesterday was one of the busiest January Sundays he could recall.

Naraj said a lot of his customers expressed concerns that their spring bulbs might be harmed if the new shoots get frozen with a return to colder temperatures.

The best thing to do, he suggested, is to cover the tiny shoots with a fine bark mulch. But even without mulching, he said there should be little permanent damage to the first flowers of spring once the warm weather rolls in for good.

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*With files from Josh Rubin*

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